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Faith Got My Tongue

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What makes people learn a foreign language, you ask. I know what made me learn a foreign language. My mother did. She made me take Spanish lessons. She also made me take piano lessons. And on the feast of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of music, I would like to honor my three piano teachers... especially Anna Beck.

First, in Germany, a grumpy old Herr Professor came to me once a week. He was a reincarnation of Beethoven and he would get purple in the face when it was all too clear that I had not been near the piano in seven days.

Then, in the Philippines, I went to a music conservatory on Taft Avenue. Taft Avenue, named so after one of our American governors who became U.S. presidents, is Manila's biggest parking lot. Yes, having to travel through dusty downtown Manila traffic two afternoons a week, after school, was tough.

My teacher was Miss Faith Got-My-Tongue. That is how it would sound if you read the real spelling. She would kick off her shoes

when her feet itched. I'd go for the *crescendo* to drown the sound (and stench) of moist stretched stockings being rubbed together, more than the claxons storming in through the open window from peaktime Taft. I loathed her heavily powdered face beaming with pride after one of our yearly recitals. But I will acknowledge that Miss Got-My-Tongue gave me a musical base and an outlet for my temperament.

Finally, in the United States, I had Anna Beck, oh Anna Beck... I still think of Anna Beck at the sight of a round metal can of Danish cookies. She often brought us a can.

At the start, it was good news to be having lessons at home again. Before long, however, the thought of her approaching visits began to weigh on us three kids. We dreaded the day and the hour and I remember that we haggled over who should sit first, second, and last. Last promised postponement, first meant getting it over with quick.

Anna Beck was kind, patient, and gentle, but there was something about her that was oppressive to me. She was scarier than a skeleton; she was a walking corpse. She had skin like skimmed milk that felt cold and clammy on my right hand, and her arm was like dead weight, and boneless. She was determined to show me how the brilliance of an *arpeggio* came not so much from the fingers as from a wrist that moved in waves.

Mrs. Beck always called when unable to come, but one day she just didn't show up. "Maybe she's dead," I said.

The following morning it was Mr. Beck who called.

Me and my big mouth. Poor Anna Beck.